

## National Park Service Faces Manzanar's Past

**“You may think the Constitution is your security—it is nothing but a piece of paper.” With these words, spoken by a Supreme Court Justice, author Michi Nishiura Weglyn found a stark statement for an equally stark place—a landscape of desert and sagebrush at the foot of southern California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains. The words recalled her years at Manzanar, captured in her book *Years of Infamy*, and stand as an epigraph for the Japanese American experience during World War II.**

Today visitors confront this difficult history, and its implications for democracy, at Manzanar National Historic site, a reminder of liberty’s frail nature. This spring, the park opens an 8,000 square-foot interpretive center, the result of extensive outreach and a case study in how the National Park Service is dealing with what historians call “sites of social conscience.” The center is the result of an effort to embrace all perspectives of an uneasy past, an inclusiveness that sums up what the staff has been doing since Manzanar became a park in 1992.

In conceiving the center, says Superintendent Frank Hays, “we did a lot more public review than I think is typical with our interpretive media.” He and his staff took the exhibit and its accompanying film, both in the formative stages, to the Japanese American community and to many local groups. Open houses served as forums for public input. This led staff to attend reunions of the camp high school where they recruited alumni to narrate the film. “The park stands for dialogue,” Hays says. “We want to provoke discussion.” Manzanar continues to consult with a variety of groups as it develops the park’s educational programs.

Racism and wartime hysteria prompted the construction of places like Manzanar. Nearly 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent, considered potential spies and saboteurs, were forced to move into detention camps, all of them in remote, desolate areas of the West.

Manzanar’s designation as a national historic site is a significant milestone in telling the hard stories that shaped America, a trend in the National Park Service. The park faced a formidable challenge in communicating the history of a place where 10,000 men, women, and children were detained in primitive barracks. Not everyone was eager to hear the story. Envisioning a national park to commemorate the event suggested a long and grinding campaign of conflict resolution. Yet, says Hays, “right from the start, I made it our policy that we were going to take it to the public.”

Park staff aggressively sought out the Japanese-American community, local residents, ranchers, and Native Americans, all constituents with ties to the land and a stake in how the park’s story would be told. “We went to where we know interest groups gather, rather than always expecting them to come to us,” says Hays. This meant attending reunions of former internees and other gatherings, getting on agendas, and bringing along a traveling exhibit and plenty of information to explain the park’s intentions.

One of the earliest challenges was how to recreate the Japanese American experience. There was concern that visitors, confronted with the natural beauty of the place, would get the impression that the internees whiled away the war years in a desert idyll. Japanese Americans strongly urged the re-creation of guard towers, barracks, barbed wire, and latrines. Reconstructions are controversial in the



**Clockwise from above:** Toyo Miyatake, an interned photographer, depicts his son’s hand and boys outside of Manzanar; two views by Ansel Adams from a trip to the camp.

preservation world, and the least-favored method of commemoration in the National Park Service. Manzanar made the case, and eventually, the re-creations were built.

The paraphernalia of imprisonment was not the only thing that should tell the story, staff learned through consultation with Japanese Americans. Former internees wanted the camp’s rock gar-



Miyatake's pictures of life at Manzanar are a part of the park's exhibit—a validation of the dire words that Michi Nishiura Weglyn found so compelling.

The trend toward embracing sites of social conscience is what some call “a profoundly democratic vision of history.” Manzanar National Historical Site's approach to the hard story that unfolded in the California desert is the essence of that vision.

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dens to be preserved. “It is so characteristically Japanese,” said a former Manzanar resident, “the way lives were made more tolerable by gathering loose desert stones and forming with them something enduringly human.” These individual monuments to the human spirit can still be seen today.

The park's outreach made such an impact that articles and letters started appearing in the *Los Angeles Times*. One letter writer, who opposed the idea of commemorating the camp, called the National Park Service a “groveling sycophant.” Manzanar staff engaged critics in the dialogue, in one case interviewing a veteran of the war in the Pacific as part of the park's oral history.

Archie Miyatake, whose father Toyo smuggled a camera and film into the camp, recalls playing outside the barracks with friends one day. His father called him inside, explaining what he planned to do: “As a photographer, I have a responsibility to record camp life so this kind of thing never happens again.” Today, Toyo

# PROBING A RIVER'S RICHES

## Yellowstone Project Wins Archeology Award

In Yellowstone's early years, "roughing it" meant exactly that. Visitors brought their own supplies, slept on the ground, and hunted their own meat. All that changed with the Marshall Hotel, the first facility of its kind in a national park. Erected in 1880 at the edge of the Firehole River, it was actually a small frontier town, precursor of the tourist communities surrounding parks today.

While the hotel's remains are of obvious archeological interest, a recent project had an unexpected focus. Hotel operators tossed trash into the river, unwittingly creating history. Last year, an investigation won the John Cotter Award for Excellence in National Park Service Archeology, given to projects that feature exemplary research design, thorough scientific analysis, broad public involvement, and wide sharing of research.

Though just a rough-hewn retreat with visitors delivered by stagecoach, the hotel evinced a commitment to one of the park system's basic principles: preservation for public enjoyment. The hotel—the first concession licensed by the U.S. Department of the Interior—included a blacksmith shop, livery stables, a saloon, and hot baths fed by the nearby thermal springs. In 1885, new management renamed the place the Firehole Hotel.

In the early 1990s, archeologists turned up what they described as "a unique and unanticipated underwater component of unknown content and extent." Nothing is more revealing than what people throw away.

There was an urgency too. Looters, anglers, and well-meaning waders had been picking the bottom for years, a problem compounded by proximity to a popular picnic area.

In part, the award was for the partnership formed to tackle the job. Archeologists from Yellowstone and the Midwest Archeological Center of the National Park Service joined with the PAST Foundation. Volunteers made the project possible, including students from East Carolina University (known for underwater archeology) and Lincoln, Nebraska's

**Below: Volunteers prepare to enter the river.**



**Above: Yellowstone's Firehole River, site of the old hotel.**

high school Science Focus Program. The Intermountain Region of the National Park Service provided a Challenge Cost Share grant, encouraging nonfederal groups to partner. The foundation matched the grant.

Annalies Corbin, an archeologist and the foundation director, says that the goal was to create an outdoor classroom with students largely responsible for the project. Under the supervision of professionals, the students were engaged in archeology's every aspect. "They were not just coming out and having a good time for a few days," she says. The group set out to define what they called "a singular early park historical landscape," with

**Left to right: Volunteer at the Firehole River; detail of object found; 1884 sketch of the hotel; examining artifacts.**



ropes stretched across the river creating transects, further demarcated by bright yellow tags. Teams worked back and forth. To see beneath the surface, they used buckets with Plexiglas bottoms, and masks with snorkels. At times, they simply resorted to touch.

As volunteers fished out artifacts, they noted what they were, where they were, photographed them, and, usually, put them back. The park museum will accession objects of educational value.

Corbin says that “this was the first archeological investigation in a thermal river environment and frankly, we had no idea what we’d find.” A concretion of living organisms covered the artifacts—called “streambed armoring”—which she likens to “old lava flow.” The concretion’s bacteria eats at ferrous objects, but protects glass and ceramics, which, says the project report, “looked like they were just unpacked from their 19th century shipping crates.”

Over time, Victorian-era tourists came to expect more than the Firehole’s rustic experience. The coarse earthenware used by the first guests gave way to finer tableware (corroborated by the river finds). Picturesque railroad ads signalled a new visitor with deeper pockets and more sophisticated tastes. By 1891, upscale lodgings went up closer to the geysers. Shortly after that, the old hotel closed its doors.

Consonant with the outreach goal, an exhibit at the site described the project; documentary producers filmed the crew at work.

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# TOGETHER APART

## Study Reveals Cultural Complexities of Plantation Life

On the banks of Louisiana’s lower Cane River, the National Park Service preserves a remarkably intact example of plantation life. Cane River Creole National Historical Park is a study in colonization, slavery, early cotton agriculture, and the complicated social geography that developed over 200 years of people working the land. Designated a national park in 1994, the 19-acre parcel includes parts of two plantations, Oakland and Magnolia, with some 45 historic structures.

Given the complex history, National Park Service ethnographers were called on to assist with interpretive planning. The result—a study just completed—is an insightful account of Magnolia’s story, largely based on interviews with descendants of enslaved people and their owners. Today, areas of the plantation still carry meaning for all groups, in what the study calls “shadows or ephemeral memory places.”

The report reveals “an immensely complex situation,” according to Muriel “Miki” Crespi of the National Park Service Archeology and Ethnography Program, principal author with Susan Dollar and Dayna Bowker Lee. Until mechanization brought modern agribusiness in the 1950s, Magnolia resembled a traditional European land-owning arrangement in its power structure and reliance on tenant farmers. The three primary groups, whites (including planters of French Creole descent), African Americans, and Creoles of color, all contributed to the plantation’s success as an economic and social enterprise.

Among the African-American descendants interviewed, “poverty and powerlessness” did not dominate reminiscences. They acknowledged the pain of the



**Above left:** Magnolia plantation; **Above right:** Prudhomme-Rouquier house, in Cane River Creole National Heritage Area; **Right:** Historic photograph of a woman at Magnolia plantation.

circumstances, but also recalled memories—passed down through generations—of rewarding lives in a tightly knit community.

Slavery, a difficult subject for all interviewees, poses a challenge to the park’s interpretive staff. Local African Americans (like the whites interviewed) prefer to see slavery interpreted as just one aspect of their multifaceted past, not a primary focus, best shown in contrast to present accomplishments.



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Superintendent Laura Gates says the interviews were part of “a validation process” for African Americans, who can see their role in Magnolia’s history and feel more connected to the park as a result.

The park is part of the larger Cane River National Heritage Area, which extends along a 35-mile stretch of Cane River. The 45,000-acre swath, which is mostly in private hands, is still an agricultural landscape. The area includes numerous historic plantations, homes, and other structures, including seven National Historic Landmarks, many of them open to the public. The National Park Service also just finished an inventory of the area’s cultural landscapes, to better understand the legacy along the river.

**Above left: Coincoin-Prudhomme house, in Cane River Creole National Heritage Area; Above right: Remnants of a plantation building.**

The study is online at [www.cr.nps.gov/aad/pubs/studies/STUDY04A.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/aad/pubs/studies/STUDY04A.htm). For more information, contact Laura Gates, Superintendent, Cane River Creole National Historical Park, 400 Rapides Dr., Natchitoches, LA 71457, (318) 352-0383, [laura\\_gates@nps.gov](mailto:laura_gates@nps.gov), [www.nps.gov/cari/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/cari/index.htm) or [www.caneriverheritage.org](http://www.caneriverheritage.org), or Allison Pena, Jean Lafitte National Historical Park, 419 Decatur St., New Orleans, LA 70130-1035, (504) 589-3882, ext. 113, [allison\\_pena@nps.gov](mailto:allison_pena@nps.gov).